

# Lancaster Eagle-Gazette (OH)

## Lancaster Eagle-Gazette (OH)

August 22, 2003

### Clark honored after more than 20 years as judge

Author: KRISTIN GORDON

By KRISTIN GORDON

The Eagle-Gazette Staff

kgordon@nncogannett.com

Wise. Thoughtful. Steady. Reliable. Fair. Honest. Dedicated to public service.

A lavish list of adjectives Ohio Supreme Court Chief Justice Thomas Moyer uses to describe the type of person he feels a judge should be. And phrases, he said Thursday, that fit Fairfield County Common Pleas Court Judge Joseph Clark to a tee.

"(Judge) Clark is the epitome to me of what a judge should be," Moyer said. A personal friend of Clark's, Moyer was invited to Lancaster by Common Pleas Court Judge Chris Martin as a surprise. From 2 to 5 p.m., a stream of well-wishers packed Clark's second-floor courtroom to congratulate him on his last official day of work.

But be careful to say the word "retirement" in his presence. Clark, 62, a county judge since 1979, is simply re-adjusting his career. "I have been assigned as a visiting judge and already have two cases right now (in other counties)," he said. "I'll be able to set my own schedule." Clark also will be a judge for the Ohio Court of Claims, Moyer announced to him at his reception.

"This is just another chapter in his life," Moyer said. "This is not the end of his career."

Clark's interest in law began as a teenager. "I started thinking about law school in high school," he said. "I knew I wanted to be a professional person of some sort."

His childhood neighbor in Lancaster, George Martin, was a prominent local attorney whom he emulated. After law school at Ohio Northern University, he later would work professionally with both Martin and his son, John Martin, a county judge. "I really looked up to (George Martin) and cherished our relationship. I knew that professionally I wanted to be like him," Clark said. "Also, both of my parents influenced me. They were strong people who believed that you did what was fair."

Before being judge, Clark worked for 13 years as a civil and criminal trial lawyer. He was a city prosecutor from 1967 to 1973. In 1992, he retired after 25 years from the U.S. Navy Judge Advocate General Corps at the rank of captain. In the last six years, he served as a general courts-martial military judge with the Navy-Marine Corps Trial Judiciary.

Desk emptied and robe hanging on a hook on the back of his chamber's door, Clark leaves the bench with mixed emotions, somewhat soft-spoken, and a little teary-eyed.

"I've been very blessed," he said. "I had the opportunity as a 37-year-old lawyer to become a municipal court judge. That's how it started. I've never looked back. "I love being a judge and it fits my professional aptitude. I like to help people dissolve their disputes."

Clark leaves in the middle of a six-year term. Gov. Bob Taft is expected to appoint a judge to fill the vacancy in the near future. Until then, Clark is appointed tentatively to handle cases on the docket through October. Since December, he's acted as a mentor to Judge Chris Martin, who began his elected term in common pleas court in February. "It's a kind of sadness to me," Martin said. "He's been virtually a lifelong community servant.

"He has high energy. He's always trying to plan ahead. He does things for the good of the court and the public." Fairfield County Prosecutor David Landefeld also said he'll miss working with Clark. "The one thing that those of use who have worked with Judge Clark for a long time agree on is that he's always a gentleman in court whether you agree with him or (not)," Landefeld said. "We certainly will miss him and all of us wish him well. "He has had some difficult cases since he's been on the bench ... he's seen a lot of change." Change that can be either expected or not during a legal career spanning more than three decades, Clark said.

"The law does constantly change and as judges, we have to keep up with that," he said. Judge's caseloads have doubled. Sentencing guidelines and criminal codes have changed. Technology has made the job easier. Salaries for judges have increased significantly. In addition to adapting to such changes, Clark is passionate about making judges, and the courts, a source of constant improvement, Moyer said. Continuing education is one of these passions. Clark is credited with more than 4,000 hours of judicial education from the Ohio and national judicial colleges, and the American Academy of Judicial Education. In 1993, he was one of three judges in the state to hold a master's degree in judicial studies. In 2002, he was appointed to chair the Ohio Jury Service Task Force, committed to trying new things in the courtroom to make jury service more rewarding for citizens. Such accomplishments couldn't have been made without others on his staff and within the numerous divisions of common pleas court, Clark said. "We have some of the best people, and the best lawyers, right here in Fairfield County," he said. "It's wonderful to work with people who are so intelligent. It really has made my job a lot easier."

Clark and his wife, Mary Jane, will continue to live in Lancaster. They have three sons.

Copyright (c) Lancaster Eagle-Gazette. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.  
Record Number: Inc6805007